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AUTHOR	Doggett, Gina
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ABSTRACT

Important features of eight second language teaching methods--grammar-translation, direct, audiolingual, the Silent Way, Suggestopedia, community language learning, Total Physical Response, and the communicative approach--are summarized . A chart outlines characteristics of these aspects of the methods: goals, teacher and student roles, the teaching/learning process, student-teacher and student-student interaction, dealing with feelings, view of language and culture, the aspects of language emphasized, the role of the students' native language, means for evaluation, and response to student errors. The report also lists additional information sources. (MSE)

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EIGHT APPROACHES TO LANGUAGE TEACHING

Gina Doggett
ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics
December 1986

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON LANGUAGES AND LINGUISTICS

Q&A

Eight Approaches to Language Teaching

Prepared by Gina Doggett

December 1986

Where there was once consensus on the "right" way to teach foreign languages, many teachers now share the belief that a single right way does not exist. It is certainly true that no comparative study has consistently demonstrated the superiority of one method over another for all teachers, all students, and all settings.

Presented here is a summary of eight language teaching methods in practice today: the Grammar-Translation Method, the Direct Method, the Audio-Lingual Method, the Silent Way, Suggestopedia, Community Language Learning, the Total Physical Response Method, and the Communicative Approach. Of course, what is decribed here is only an abstraction. How a method is manifest in the classroom will depend heavily on the individual teacher's interpretation of its principles.

Some teachers prefer to practice one of these methods to the exclusion of the others. Other teachers prefer to pick and choose in a principled way among the methodological options that exist, creating their own unique blend.

The chart inside provides a brief listing of the salient features of the eight methods. For more details, readers should consult Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching *by Diane Larsen-Freeman, published in 1986 by Oxford University Press in New York, on which this summary was based. Also see references listed on the back page.*

Grammar-Translation Method

The Grammar-Translation Method focuses on developing students' appreciation of the target language's literature as well as teaching the language. Students are presented with target-language reading passages and answer questions that follow. Other activities include translating literary passages from one language into the other, memorizing grammar rules, and memorizing native-language equivalents of target language vocabulary. Class work is highly structured, with the teacher controlling all activities.

Direct Method

The Direct Method allows students to perceive meaning directly through the target language because no translation is allowed. Visual aids and pantomime are used to clarify the meaning of vocabulary items and concepts. Students speak a great deal in the target language and communicate as if in real situations. Reading and writing are taught from the beginning, though speaking and listening skills are emphasized. Grammar is learned inductively.

Audio-Lingual Method

The Audio-Lingual Method is based on the behaviorist belief that language learning is the acquisition of a set of correct language habits. The learner repeats patterns until able to produce them spontaneously. Once a given pattern—for example, subject-verb-prepositional phrase—is learned, the speaker can substitute words to make novel sentences. The teacher directs and controls students' behavior, provides a model, and reinforces correct responses.

The Silent Way

The theoretical basis of Gattegno's Silent Way is the idea that teaching must be subordinated to learning and thus students must develop their own inner criteria for correctness. All four skills—reading, writing, speaking, and listening—are taught from the beginning. Students' errors are expected as a normal part of learning; the teacher's silence helps foster self-reliance and student initiative. The teacher is active in setting up situations, while the students do most of the talking and interacting.

Suggestopedia

Lozanov's method seeks to help learners eliminate psychological barriers to learning. The learning environment is relaxed and subdued, with low lighting and soft music in the background. Students choose a name and character in the target language and culture, and imagine being that person. Dialogs are presented to the accompaniment of music. Students just relax and listen to them being read and later playfully practice the language during an "activation" phase.

Community Language Learning

In Curren's method, teachers consider students as "whole persons," with intellect, feelings, instincts, physical responses, and desire to learn. Teachers also recognize that learning can be threatening. By understanding and accepting students' fears, teachers help students feel secure and overcome their fears, and thus help them harness positive energy for learning. The syllabus used is learner-generated, in that students choose what they want to learn to say in the target language.

Total Physical Response Method

Asher's approach begins by placing primary importance on listening comprehension, emulating the early stages of mother tongue acquisition, and then moving to speaking, reading, and writing. Students demonstrate their comprehension by acting out commands issued by the teacher; teacher provides novel and often humorous variations of the commands. Activities are designed to be fun and to allow students to assume active learning roles. Activities eventually include games and skits.

The Communicative Approach

The Communicative Approach stresses the need to teach communicative competence as opposed to linguistic competence; thus, functions are emphasized over forms. Students usually work with authentic materials in small groups on communicative activities, during which they receive practice in negotiating meaning.

Eight Approaches to Language Teaching

The Grammar-Translation Method

Goals

To be able to read literature in target language; learn grammar rules and vocabulary; develop mental acuity.

Roles

Teacher has authority; students follow instructions to learn what teacher knows.

Teaching/Learning Process

Students learn by translating from one language to the other, often translating reading passages in the target language to the native language. Grammar is usually learned deductively on the basis of grammar rules and examples. Students memorize the rules, then apply them to other examples. They learn paradigms such as verb conjugations, and they learn the native language equivalents of vocabulary words.

Interaction: Student-Teacher & Student-Student

Most interaction is teacher-to-student; student-initiated interaction and student-student interaction is minimal.

Dealing with Feelings

n/a

View of Language, Culture

Literary language seen as superior to spoken language; culture equated with literature and fine arts.

Aspects of Language the Approach Emphasizes

Vocabulary, grammar emphasized; reading, writing are primary skills; pronunciation and other speaking/listening skills not emphasized.

Role of Students' Native Language

Native language provides key to meanings in target language; native language is used freely in class.

Means for Evaluation

Tests require translation from native to target and target to native language; applying grammar rules, answering questions about foreign culture.

Response to Students' Errors

Heavy emphasis placed on correct answers; teacher supplies correct answers when students cannot.

The Direct Method

Goals

To communicate in target language; to think in target language.

Roles

Teacher directs class activities, but students and teacher are partners in the teaching/learning process.

Teaching/Learning Process

Students are taught to associate meaning and the target language directly. New target language words or phrases are introduced through the use of realia, pictures, or pantomime, never the native language. Students speak in the target language a great deal and communicate as if in real situations. Grammar rules are learned inductively—by generalizing from examples. Students practice new vocabulary using words in sentences.

Interaction: Student-Teacher & Student-Student

Both teacher and students initiate interaction, though student-initiated interaction, with teacher or among each other, is usually teacher-directed.

Dealing with Feelings

n/a

View of Language, Culture

Language is primarily spoken, not written. Students study common, everyday speech in the target language. Aspects of foreign culture are studied such as history, geography, daily life.

Aspects of Language the Approach Emphasizes

Vocabulary emphasized over grammar; oral communication considered basic, with reading, writing based on oral practice; pronunciation emphasized from outset.

Role of Students' Native Language

Not used in the classroom.

Means for Evaluation

Students tested through actual use, such as in oral interviews and assigned written paragraphs.

Response to Students' Errors

Self-correction encouraged whenever possible.

The Audio-Lingual Method

Goals

Use the target language communicatively, overlearn it, so as to be able to use it automatically by forming new habits in the target language and overcoming native language habits.

Roles

Teacher directs, controls students' language behavior, provides good model for imitation; students repeat, respond as quickly and accurately as possible.

Teaching/Learning Process

New vocabulary, structures presented through dialogs, which are learned through imitation, repetition. Drills are based on patterns in dialog. Students' correct responses are positively reinforced; grammar is induced from models. Cultural information is contextualized in the dialogs or presented by the teacher. Reading, writing tasks are based on oral work.

Interaction: Student-Teacher & Student-Student

Students interact during chain drills or when taking roles in dialogs, all at teacher's direction. Most interaction is between teacher and student, initiated by teacher.

Dealing with Feelings

n/a

View of Language, Culture

Descriptive linguistics influence: every language seen as having its own unique system of phonological, morphological, and syntactic patterns. Method emphasizes everyday speech and uses a graded syllabus from simple to difficult linguistic structures. Culture comprises everyday language and behavior.

Aspects of Language the Approach Emphasizes

Language structures emphasized; vocabulary contextualized in dialogs but is limited because syntactic patterns are foremost; natural priority of skills—listening, speaking, reading, writing, with emphasis on first two; pronunciation taught from beginning, often with language lab work and minimal pair drills.

Role of Students' Native Language

Students' native language habits are considered as interfering, thus native language is not used in classroom. Contrastive analysis is considered helpful for determining points of interference.

Means for Evaluation

Discrete-point tests in which students distinguish between words or provide an appropriate verb for a sentence, etc.

Response to Students' Errors

Teachers strive to prevent student errors by predicting trouble spots and tightly controlling what they teach students to say.

Adapted from *Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching* by Diane Larsen-Freeman. Copyright © 1986 by Oxford University Press, Inc. Adapted by permission.

The Silent Way

Goals

To use language for self-expression; to develop independence from the teacher, to develop inner criteria for correctness.

Roles

Teaching should be subordinated to learning. Teachers should give students only what they absolutely need to promote their learning. Learners are responsible for their own learning.

Teaching/Learning Process

Students begin with sounds, introduced through association of sounds in native language to a sound-color chart. Teacher then sets up situations, often using Cuisenaire rods, to focus students' attention on structures. Students interact as the situation requires. Teachers see students' errors as clues to where the target language is unclear, and they adjust instruction accordingly. Students are urged to take responsibility for their learning. Additional learning is thought to take place during sleep.

Interaction: Student-Teacher & Student-Student

The teacher is silent much of the time, but very active setting up situations, listening to students, speaking only to give clues, not to model speech. Student-student interaction is encouraged.

Dealing with Feelings

Teachers monitor students' feelings and actively try to prevent their feelings from interfering with their learning. Students express their feelings during feedback sessions after class.

View of Language, Culture

Language and culture are inseparable, and each language is seen to be unique despite similarities in structure with other languages.

Aspects of Language the Approach Emphasizes

All four skill areas worked on from beginning (reading, writing, speaking, listening); pronunciation especially, because sounds are basic and carry the melody of the language. Structural patterns are practiced in meaningful interactions. Syllabus develops according to learning abilities and needs. Reading and writing exercises reinforce oral learning.

Role of Students' Native Language

Although translation is not used at all, the native language is considered a resource because of the overlap that is bound to exist between the two languages. The teacher should take into account what the students already know.

Means for Evaluation

Assessment is continual; but only to determine continually changing learning needs. Teachers observe students' ability to transfer what they have learned to new contexts. To encourage the development of inner criteria, neither praise nor criticism is offered. Students are expected to learn at different rates, and to make progress, not necessarily speak perfectly in the beginning.

Response to Students' Errors

Errors are inevitable, a natural, indispensable part of learning.

Suggestopedia

Goals

To learn, at accelerated pace, a foreign language for everyday communication by tapping mental powers, overcoming psychological barriers.

Roles

Teacher has authority, commands trust and respect of students; teacher "desuggests" negative feelings and limits to learning; if teacher succeeds in assuming this role, students assume childlike role, spontaneous and uninhibited.

Teaching/Learning Process

Students learn in a relaxing environment. They choose a new identity (name, occupation) in the target language and culture. They use texts of dialogs accompanied by translations and notes in their native language. Each dialog is presented during two musical concerts; once with the teacher matching his or her voice to the rhythm and pitch of the music while students follow along. The second time, the teacher reads normally and students relax and listen. At night and on waking, the students read it over. Then students gain facility with the new material through activities such as dramatizations, games, songs, and question-and-answer sessions.

Interaction: Student-Teacher & Student-Student

At first, teacher initiates all interaction and students respond only nonverbally or with a few words in target language that they have practiced. Eventually, students initiate interaction. Students interact with each other throughout, as directed by teacher.

Dealing with Feelings

Great importance is placed on students' feelings, in making them feel confident and relaxed, in "desuggesting" their psychological barriers.

View of Language, Culture

Language is one plane; nonverbal parts of messages are another. Culture includes everyday life and fine arts.

Aspects of Language the Approach Emphasizes

Vocabulary emphasized, some explicit grammar. Students focus on communicative use rather than form; reading, writing also have place.

Role of Students' Native Language

Translation clarifies dialogs' meaning; teacher uses native language, more at first than later, when necessary.

Means for Evaluation

Students' normal in-class performance is evaluated. There are no tests, which would threaten relaxed environment.

Response to Students' Errors

Errors are not immediately corrected; teacher models correct forms later during class.

Community Language Learning

Goals

To learn language communicatively, to take responsibility for learning, to approach the task nondefensively, never separating intellect from feelings.

Roles

Teacher acts as counselor, supporting students with understanding of their struggle to master language in often threatening new learning situation. Student is at first a dependent client of the counselor and becomes increasingly independent through five specified stages.

Teaching/Learning Process

Nondefensive learning requires six elements: security, aggression (students have opportunities to assert, involve themselves), attention, reflection (students think about both the language and their experience learning it), retention, and discrimination (sorting out differences among target language forms).

Interaction: Student-Teacher & Student-Student

Both students and teacher make decisions in the class. Sometimes the teacher directs action, other times the students interact independently. A spirit of cooperation is encouraged.

Dealing with Feelings

Teacher routinely probes for students' feelings about learning and shows understanding, helping them overcome negative feelings.

View of Language, Culture

Language is for communication, a medium of interpersonal sharing and belonging, and creative thinking. Culture is integrated with language.

Aspects of Language the Approach Emphasizes

At first, since students design syllabus, they determine aspects of language studied; later teacher may bring in published texts. Particular grammar, pronunciation points are treated, and particular vocabulary based on students' expressed needs. Understanding and speaking are emphasized, though reading and writing have a place.

Role of Students' Native Language

Use of native language enhances students' security. Students have conversations in their native language; target language translations of these become the text around which subsequent activities revolve. Also, instructions and sessions for expressing feelings are in native language. Target language is used progressively more. Where students do not share the same native language, the target language is used from the outset, though alternatives such as pantomime are also used.

Means for Evaluation

No specific means are recommended, but adherence to principles is urged. Teacher would help students prepare for any test required by school, integrative tests would be preferred over discrete-point tests; self-evaluation would be encouraged, promoting students' awareness of their own progress.

Response to Students' Errors

Nonthreatening style is encouraged; modeling of correct forms.

Total Physical Response Method

Goals

To provide an enjoyable learning experience, having a minimum of the stress that typically accompanies learning a foreign language.

Roles

At first the teacher gives commands and students follow them. Once students are "ready to speak," they take on directing roles.

Teaching/Learning Process

Lessons begin with commands by the teacher; students demonstrate their understanding by acting these out; teachers recombine their instructions in novel and often humorous ways; eventually students follow suit. Activities later include games and skits.

Interaction: Student-Teacher & Student-Student

Teacher interacts with individual students and with the group, starting with the teacher speaking and the students responding nonverbally. Later this is reversed; students issue commands to teacher as well as each other.

Dealing with Feelings

The method was developed principally to reduce the stress associated with language learning; students are not forced to speak before they are ready and learning is made as enjoyable as possible, stimulating feelings of success and low anxiety.

View of Language, Culture

Oral modality is primary; culture is the lifestyle of native speakers of the target language.

Aspects of Language the Approach Emphasizes

Grammatical structures and vocabulary are emphasized, imbedded in imperatives. Understanding precedes production; spoken language precedes the written word.

Role of Students' Native Language

Method is introduced in students' native language, but rarely used later in course. Meaning is made clear through actions.

Means for Evaluation

Teachers can evaluate students through simple observation of their actions. Formal evaluation is achieved by commanding a student to perform a series of actions.

Response to Students' Errors

Students are expected to make errors once they begin speaking. Teachers only correct major errors, and do this unobtrusively. "Fine-tuning" occurs later.

The Communicative Approach

Goals

To become communicatively competent, able to use the language appropriate for a given social context; to manage the process of negotiating meaning with interlocutors.

Roles

Teacher facilitates students' learning by managing classroom activities, setting up communicative situations. Students are communicators, actively engaged in negotiating meaning.

Teaching/Learning Process

Activities are communicative—they represent an information gap that needs to be filled; speakers have a choice of what to say and how to say it; they receive feedback from the listener that will verify that a purpose has been achieved. Authentic materials are used. Students usually work in small groups.

Interaction: Student-Teacher & Student-Student

Teacher initiates interactions between students and participates sometimes. Students interact a great deal with each other in many configurations.

Dealing with Feelings

Emphasis is on developing motivation to learn through establishing meaningful, purposeful things to do with the target language. Individuality is encouraged, as well as cooperation with peers, which both contribute to sense of emotional security with the target language.

View of Language, Culture

Language is for communication. Linguistic competence must be coupled with an ability to convey intended meaning appropriately in different social contexts. Culture is the everyday lifestyle of native speakers of the target language. Nonverbal behavior is important.

Aspects of Language the Approach Emphasizes

Functions are emphasized over forms, with simple forms learned for each function at first, then more complex forms. Students work at discourse level. They work on speaking, listening, reading, and writing from the beginning. Consistent focus on negotiated meaning.

Role of Students' Native Language

Students' native language usually plays no role.

Means for Evaluation

Informal evaluation takes place when teacher advises or communicates; formal evaluation is by means of an integrative test with a real communicative function.

Response to Students' Errors

Errors of form are considered natural; students with incomplete knowledge of forms can still succeed as communicators.

For Further Reading

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Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL)
1118 22nd St., NW
Washington, DC 20037

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